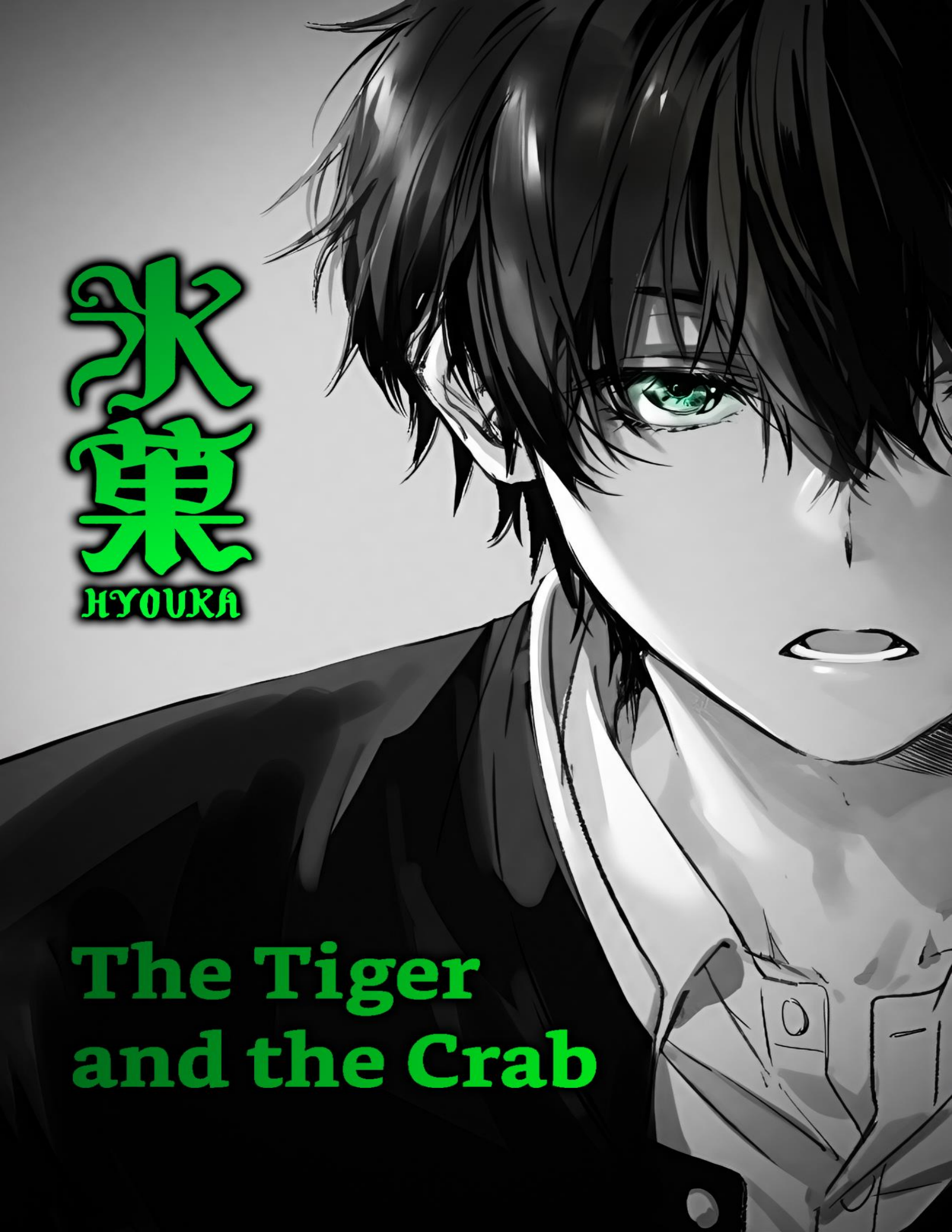
氷菓
HYOUKA
The Tiger and the Crab

氷菓
HYOUKA
The Tiger
and the Crab

古典部〉シリーズ

Classics Club Series

【 Short Story 】

The Tiger and the Crab, or The Murder of Oreki Houtarou

Written by Honobu Yonezawa

Published by Kadokawa Shoten on October, 2017

Translated by Manlyflower
EPUB by swhp

Bad things are simply not worth doing. The past will eventually catch up with you. Even if you desperately insist that you were young when you did it—that everyone makes mistakes at that age—you cannot expect to be able to hide behind those circumstances in the face of irrefutable evidence. Finding myself ensnared in something like a trap set long ago, a line from a book I read recently comes to mind: fate defies expectation; one truly cannot predict where its pitfalls will open[1]. If only because it left with me the resolve to live the rest of my life as honestly as possible, I can say that there was value in the mental torture of having my past evils brought to light today in this place.

One Tuesday, in a rare event, every member of the Classics Club happened to be present in the geology classroom. Why did everyone attend on this one day—wasn't there only ever at most two or three? The whole thing irritated me to no end.

In a fit of enthusiasm, the first-year Ohinata exclaimed, "I brought it with me!" while placing the pamphlet she was referring to on a desk, and—what can I say—it felt like being ambushed by something supposedly buried and forgotten.

"Would you look at that. This brings back some memories," Satoshi remarked casually. Next to him, Ibara spoke up in admiration.

"You managed to find it. You hang on to some good stuff."

Ohinata puffed out her chest in an exaggerated motion. "I know, right? My friend always says the same thing."

I suppose that means Ibara was the one responsible for this particular pamphlet showing up like this in the geology classroom after school. I tried to quell the growing sense of unease welling up inside me and focus on the book in my hands, but it wasn't going so well.

Chitanda, who had been sitting in the back of the class, stood up and looked at the pamphlet that Ohinata had placed on the desk.

"***Book Report Examples***... What is it?"

"Well, you see..." Ohinata started, but then glanced over at Ibara, who continued where she left off.

"Back in Kaburaya Middle School, they would hand them out before summer break started. Everyone had to do book reports over their vacations, but most people had no idea where to begin. That's why they gave us the book reports from the previous year, to use as a reference."

"Mr. Hanashima was the one that did it, right?" Satoshi added, to which Ohinata said something like, "Hana-cchi! That name takes me back!"

Did people really call him that...?

"By Mr. Hanashima, you mean the Japanese Studies teacher at Kaburaya Middle School, yes? I believe he was the one that sent Oreki's book report to the city contest," said Chitanda.

"That's him," Satoshi nodded with pride. "He was a big stickler when it came to things like using words and grammar correctly, but as long as you did that, he was always saying how he wanted

us to write about books with whatever perspective we wanted. I remember this pamphlet was filled with like, um, like the most extreme examples he could find. Like he was trying to show us just how much freedom we had. We got one every year, so three in total. I figured all the other middle schools did it, but I guess I was wrong."

"Yes, we didn't have anything like this in Inji Middle School."

Out of all of the Classics Club members, Chitanda was the only one who went to a different middle school.

"Did you use them as a reference as well, Fukube-san?" she continued.

"I remember the examples were pretty fun, but in terms of actually learning from them… Actually, I'm pretty sure I didn't even do the book reports in the first place."

That's probably not the kind of thing you should say with that much gusto. Ibara shook her head with disappointment.

"I read it. I enjoyed it every year, to be honest," Ohinata said, loud as ever. "I really like Japanese Studies, but when I read this, I can't help but realize how stiff my thinking is. All I can do is write normal textbook analysis."

"On that subject," Chitanda said with a joking smile, "you'll find I'm hard to beat."

"Haha. Oh, the woes of us normal folk."

"Indeed."

Part of me wasn't exactly ready to agree with Ohinata and Chitanda calling themselves normal folk. Well, I guess you could say they were normal in some regards when compared to Satoshi at least.

For no reason in particular, I directed by eyes towards the windows and saw the various athletic clubs scattered around the school yard. It was Spring, and there were blossoms still on the cherry trees. The clubs that managed to secure new members were probably still in the teaching-the-basics stage. There wasn't any real knowledge vital in the Classics Club, nor any pointers for how to avoid getting injured, so having a random conversation like this was all we could really do.

Chitanda picked up the pamphlet and turned the page.

"I read "***Rump-Titty-Titty-Tum-TAH-Tee.***" Oh? It looks like the person who did this one has their name in only initials. K.B. I can only think of two students who fit that."

"This one has the full name. Aoki Kaoruko."

The pamphlet would be seen by their underclassmen, after all, so there were lots of people who didn't want their reports to be added to it. There was nothing you could do if your report was chosen in the city contest, but that aside, most students preferred their names weren't exposed to those in the grades below them. The whole point of the pamphlet was to serve as a guide for students writing their book reports, so there wasn't really any need for the names of the writers. For those who didn't want their names in it, their initials were used instead.

“Forget about that…” said Ohinata as she took the pamphlet back from Chitanda. She flipped through a couple pages and then grandly announced that which I had been so desperately pleading against on the inside. “This is the part I want to show you guys. I read ***Records of the Moon over the Mountain***—by H.O.”

This single part was the sole reason she unearthed this booklet.

“Someone who went to Kabuyara Middle School, and who has the initials H.O…” Chitanda wondered.

“Someone one year older than Ohinata, which means someone in the same grade as we are…” Ibara muttered.

“H.O. Ho… Ho… Someone who would choose ***Records of the Moon over the Mountain***, a story as short as it is famous…” Satoshi mused, head tilted.

These people continue to torment me to no end. I placed the paperback book I was holding onto my desk and said obstinately, “It’s not me.”

Ohinata clapped her hands with glee. “You don’t say! If it wasn’t you, senpai, then I guess we can read it to our hearts’ content.”

I was at a loss for words.

“I take it back. It was me.”

Satoshi grinned back sympathetically, and Ibara placed her hands on her hips.

“Of course we knew that, Houtarou.”

“Why would you try such an obvious lie?”

With a caring smile, Chitanda tilted her head a fraction. “You must’ve been embarrassed, Oreki-san.”

If it was that obvious, then why did you bring it up?!

Do you want to read it? Ohinata asked, to which the other members all responded in their own ways that they did. There was no longer anywhere for me to run. Well, as long as ‘Records of the Moon over the Mountain’ was the only one they read, at least it wouldn’t amount to a fatal blow.

“Now then, everyone, in an effort for all of us to further strengthen our abilities in the Japanese Studies, I would like to present to you… Oreki-senpai’s book report!” As Ohinata said this, she stole a glance in my direction and continued with an earnest expression, “That is, if it’s okay with you, senpai.”

I’m getting déjà vu… The same exact thing happened just last week. My answer remains unchanged.

“It’s already been released for the world to see. Do whatever you want.”

Although, strictly speaking, I allowed for it to be published for my middle school underclassmen to see under the condition that it was done anonymously, I couldn’t exactly rescind that permission now that the author was revealed. That said, three years ago, when I was asked if I was okay with my submission being put into a pamphlet for the younger students, I could’ve never imagined it would come back to haunt me like this, making me

the butt of my high school club's jokes. There's no going back from it being made public, and it's not like I can attach any conditions to it in the first place… At least, that's what my sister would say.

Ohinata beamed and then looked around at all of the club members.

"On that note, is there anyone here who hasn't read ***Records of the Moon over the Mountain***?"

The geology classroom was enveloped by a strange silence.

From what I can tell, it's not a silence that necessarily indicates everyone has read the story. I have a feeling it's more along the lines of: *I read it, sure, but if there was anyone here who didn't, they'd probably feel awkward about forcing everyone to take the time to read it right now.* At any rate, Satoshi was the first person to speak up.

"Maybe I have… Could you give us a little summary?"

"Roger!"

Puffing out her chest, Ohinata started to speak in a clear voice.

"***Records of the Moon over the Mountain*** is a really famous short story by Atsushi Nakajima. It starts with a very talented man who passes the state exam and becomes a government official, but he eventually quits in order to write poetry and pass his name down in history. As doesn't go so well, however, he once again finds a job, but eventually he disappears since he can't handle the treatment.

“Some time after his disappearance, another government official is suddenly attacked by a tiger while walking through the mountains. Right before it kills him, the tiger suddenly escapes back into the brushes, saying something like, ‘That was a close one.’ Recognizing the tiger’s voice, the official calls out the name of the man who disappeared some time back, and from the bush, he hears the tiger say that it was him. I can’t really explain why he became a tiger in the first place or what was going on in his mind after he ran away, though.”

Satoshi responded with an ambiguous expression, “Gotcha. Thanks.”

Ohinata placed a hand on the pamphlet and smiled proudly, as if she’d been the one to write it.

“When I read this analysis by H.O., I was blown away. It’s not like the idea never occurred to me, but I had never even considered to flesh out the concept, let alone submit it as a homework assignment. I’m glad I was able to meet the author. I’d love to shake your hand.”

Our desks were far apart. The both of us held out our hands into the nothingness and exchanged an imaginary handshake.

“With that, um, let’s do it like this.”

With the pamphlet laying open on the desk, the four of them excluding me lined up their heads side-by-side and started to read.

I moved as if returning to my paperback, but my mind was in disarray, and concentrating on anything would probably be a tall

order. I remember what I wrote for the most part.

I Read “Records of the Moon over the Mountain”

H.O. - Second Year

I read “***Records of the Moon over the Mountain.***” It was very interesting. I’m glad Richou and Ensan were able to see each other again. It’s good Richou was still doing well. I hope he manages to live a long life.

There are cats near where I live, and though I’ve heard them meow before, I’ve never heard them speak. I don’t pay close attention to them, so it’s possible that they do in fact speak when I’m not around, but it’s probably safe to say that they don’t. The shape of their mouths, tongues, and throats are different from that of humans, after all.

Ensan was attacked by a tiger in the mountains. The tiger stopped before reaching him and then hid itself in the thicket, muttering over and over, “That was a close one.” Hearing that, Ensan asked, “From your voice, could it be my dear friend, Richou?!” The tiger responded, “Indeed.” Ensan spoke facing the thicket, and the answer came from that direction.

Like cats, tigers have mouths, tongues, and throats different from those of humans’. Even if it possessed

the mind of a human, it would be impossible for the tiger to replicate human speech, or at the very least, it would come out garbled and awkward. Unlike parrots and their ability to mimic sound, a tiger's voice would probably be strange.

From the quiet voice alone, however, Ensan was able to tell it was Richou. This means that the voice belonged to Richou. If tigers can't talk, and Ensan heard Richou's voice, then there can be only one possible conclusion.

In the thicket were both a tiger and Richou, still in human form.

The fact that Richou was able to speak calmly while with the tiger likely meant that he had somehow tamed it. Then what was Richou doing in the mountains? I believe there are two possibilities.

The first is that, in order to prevent tigers from attacking people as much as possible, he was trying his best to keep them in line. Without others knowing, Richou kept an eye on the tigers and made sure they didn't attack anyone—he was a great person.

The other is that he set the tiger on passing travelers, retrieving money and valuables from their corpses. He was essentially a bandit—he was a bad person.

It’s difficult to conclude whether Richou was a protector or a bandit from the story he gave Ensan. Richou was deeply embarrassed by his inability to become a poet, so it was likely they he’d hide that side of the story if in reality he wasn’t able to become one. Though, there is one possibility that I found myself considering.

After telling Ensan about what went through his mind after being unable to become a poet and reading some of the poetry he made, Richou asks him to take care of his family and quickly admonishes himself, saying, “I should’ve started by asking that… if I were really human.”

I think this is a little strange, however. Having experienced the bitterness of failing to become a first-rate poet, Richou abandoned both his position in society as well as his family. After meeting his old friend like that, talking about those hardships first strikes me as the more human thing to do, yet he becomes ashamed in himself and gives an unnecessary self-deprecating excuse like this anyways. Why was this?

Couldn’t the reason be because Richou knew his family was safe from the start? After being late in asking Ensan to take care of his family, it’s possible Richou was frightened he gave away that he knew his family had enough money and shelter to live without any problems. As a result, he could’ve

panicked and mentioned his family later, blaming the delayed response on his lack of humanity as an afterthought.

Richou would've known about his family having enough money, of course, because he was the one sending it to them. He couldn't earn money looking after his tiger, so I think it's safe to say that's why he left the house to become a bandit.

After the tiger narrowly avoided attacking Ensan, Richou kept on repeating to himself, "That was a close one." It's possible he said that not because he realized it was his friend, but for a different reason. It was still night out, and their surroundings were dark. It's possible that he didn't see Ensan's face, but instead noticed the clothes and ornamentation that showed his position.

Richou, the tiger-taming bandit, realized that his prey that day was a government official at the last possible second and immediately stopped the tiger. If he did kill a government official, they would probably start exterminating that area's tiger population in earnest. It's possible even the military would've gotten involved. That's why Richou continued to say, "That was a close one." It really was, after all.

It's good Richou seemed to be doing well, but his job is a dangerous one. He may not live such a long life.

> This is my impression from reading “Records of the Moon over the Mountain.”

I heard an unintelligible sigh that was somewhere between shock and disappointment. I couldn’t tell who it came from, but it seemed pretty clear that it wasn’t one of admiration. There’s a certain saying: the first to strike wins. Before anyone could say anything to me, I seized the initiative.

“You know how it goes. Kids in middle school always come up with lame stuff like this.”

With quiet awe, Satoshi said, “I don’t know what to say. I didn’t think you were too weird back in middle school, but you were really something else, weren’t you?”

Ohinata was brimming with glee. “I never even considered the fact that Ensan wasn’t directly seeing the tiger speak—even though I’ve read it so many times!”

Ibara on the other hand seemed unconvinced. “Sure it’s interesting… but is accepting the story as it is really so bad? I mean, it’s a story with talking tiger, so I just took it at face-value and read it like that.”

“I think that’s fine too.”

Not even I honestly believed that Richou was actually a bandit. There’s no way I’d miss the fact that the tiger was a just metaphor for his twisted heart. Instead of trying to be sensible and settling on a be-all-end-all conclusion, all it was was me wondering if I

could read it like this solely from what was written in the text—simple, possibly even mean-spirited, fun. Above all, the truth was that I purposely read the story with such an arbitrary lens as to find a theory that might be interesting. Because of that, even the Japanese Studies teacher Mr. Hanashima was only able to smile hesitantly and say, *It's fun, but some of it goes a little overboard*, when he saw it.

Accepting the text with "It's just that kind of story" is almost like the reader lending the story a helping hand. It's like they've agreed to help one another, or even became partners in crime. This kind of acceptance isn't anything rare—I'd even call it common. Sure you could say it's strange when a musical actor leaps out into the streets, singing out loud, and that all historical magistrates seem like terrible people, but saying it's strange isn't going to accomplish anything. After seeing my book report—in which I seemed to reject all forms of cooperation with the text and tossed them and their common ground into trash—I find even myself inclined to agree that it was the work of a middle schooler.

I didn't feel like trudging though an explanation of any of that to Ibara. I would only be embarrassing myself further.

Chitanda's already massive eyes were open even further, but she didn't say anything—almost like a deer in headlights. Just as I thought she was going to say something like, *What? You've never seen a talking cat before, Oreki-san?*, her eyes turned to mine without changing in size. From her expression, I couldn't tell if it was out of surprise or incredulity, but I got the feeling I was being scolded for whatever reason and averted my gaze.

“Oreki-san—”

The rest was seemingly stuck in her throat.

“—you really are incredible.”

I can take that as praise, right?

Well, at any rate, the difficult part is over. We can finally stop doing unproductive things like dredging up someone’s unfortunate past and focus all of our energy on a constructive future. I mean, what about the club anthology? In light of the upcoming culture festival, let us all work together to create a brilliant anthology and spread the name of the Classics Club throughout the halls of Kamiyama High!

…Or not. If I say that now, Satoshi will probably end up replying with something like, *Good point. How about we get Houtarou to do an analysis of* ***The Tale of Heike*** *for it?*[2]

Well this is a problem. How am I going to change the topic now? Ohinata didn’t let this moment of hesitation get past her. Of course, that’s not to say she was aiming for some kind of opening in my defense to start with. She was probably just acting according to her own original plan, but it certainly felt like my defenselessness was being taken advantage of. Ohinata suddenly reached her hand into her school-issued bag and pulled out another pamphlet titled “***Book Report Examples.***”

“Actually, this one’s my favorite.”

Where did you set your pitfall, you foul demon called Fate?!

The reason Ohinata took the effort to search her room for this pamphlet was almost undoubtedly because, at some point in time unbeknown to me, Ibara had told her about my book reports. By some freak occurrence, the report I wrote on "***Run Melos***" in my first year of middle school was the first point in a series of events that eventually led to the conversation happening in front of me in this geology classroom. Hearing about it probably caused Ohinata to suddenly remember the "***Book Report Examples.***"

In my first year at Kaburaya, I wrote about "***Run Melos.***" In my second, I wrote about "***Records of the Moon over the Mountain.***" Thinking back to either of those reports makes me go red in the face with embarrassment. Deep down inside, it makes me want to scream at the top of my lungs while somehow purging all of the memories related to them from existence, but… but there's no going back for me after this next one.

"I got another one in my third year as well, and it also had an analysis from H.O. It kinda feels like some of the sentences are off, but I was pretty fond of it anyways."

Is it… is it too late for me to do anything? If I chose to kick my chair aside, lung at Ohinata with everything I had, rip the pamphlet from her hands and then tear it to shreds, shoving all the pieces down my throat, would I have enough time? Even if, in this hypothetical world, it was impossible for me to eradicate all the copies of this "Book Report Examples," wouldn't I—if only at this very time and in this very place—at least be able to prevent my third-year book report from seeing the light of day?

“Also, it’s about the story, ***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab***,” Ohinata continued.

Ah, she just had to say it.

“Wait, are you serious?”

“Really?”

Satoshi and Ibara both spoke up in unison, and as they did, the pamphlet ended up making its way atop the desk. There’s nothing left I can do. It might’ve been possible for me do something about it had I only reacted right away, but as it stands now, my common sense and dignity as a human being prevented me from making such a small, insignificant pamphlet like that disappear. Ah, those who are slow to decide lose everything. In this moment, I have learned this lesson…

In all reality, if I say something like, *Oh wow, I didn’t realize you had that one too. I’d rather you didn’t read it*, I know these guys won’t push the issue. No one likes having something teased like that taken from under their noses, and I’m sure the curious Chitanda would die a little on the inside if I did do that, but on the outside at least, she’d probably be understanding.

The reason I can’t say it is because of my earlier declaration, *It’s already been released for the world to see. Do whatever you want.* Even though her having another of my book reports would seem like an obvious possibility had I only given it some thought, I still went ahead with my go-to response. It really ate me up on the inside, seeing the answer I gave with my usual thought process

being twisted here like this. I could feel myself getting cheaper by the day.

Because of all of this, I have no choice but to bear the public reading of my book report on "***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab.***"

What am I getting all worked up about? I'm still in the clear. At first glace, it's just your everyday book report after all. There's no way they'll notice anything out of place, right?

I decided to not watch them—or rather, I wasn't able to continue looking over there in the first place—but I could still hear what they were saying.

"I'm terribly sorry to do this again, but is there anyone here who hasn't read ***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab?***"

Satoshi responded, "Folk tales have a lot of variations. Let if know if my version is different."

"Well, actually, the thing is—"

"It's about a monkey who trades his persimmon for a crab's rice ball, but the persimmon doesn't ripen, so the crab plants the seed instead. That seed eventually grows into a persimmon tree, and the monkey decides to take fruit from it. The monkey ends up eating a ton of the persimmons, and after some stuff happens, the monkey takes one of the unripened persimmons and throws it at the crab, killing it.

"The crab had a son, and that son decided to get revenge. Allied with a chestnut, a bee, some horse shit—excuse the French—and

a mortar, he invades the monkey's home. The monkey tries cooking the chestnut over a fire pit, but it explodes, burning him all over. When he goes to get some water to soothe his injury, the bee stings him, and he runs outside his house to escape. When he does, he steps in the horse shit and falls over, at which point the mortar falls on top of him, crushing and killing him on the spot. With that, the crab's revenge is a success. The story goes something like that."

Ohinata let out an impressed voice. "Amazing. People usually forget at least one part when they try to remember folk tales. You really know your stuff, Fukube-senpai!"

"Well, you know, I'm not *that*—"

"But I'm sorry to say that's not it. I was going to tell you this, but ***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab*** here actually refers to Ryuunosuke Akutagawa's short story, not the folk tale."

What she said. Sorry about that, Satoshi.

Of course, Satoshi didn't seem all too heartbroken.

"Oh yeah? I had no idea there was a story like that."

Ibara also started to speak. "Neither did I, though I have been meaning to read more Akutagawa…"

Chitanda, on the other hand, remained silent. Perhaps she was reading.

"This ***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab*** is a really tiny one—you could call it a short short story. It's about what happened after the crab got his revenge. Instead of returning to a peaceful life after

the events of the folk tale, the crab and his friends are captured for committing the murder—the one killed was the monkey, but I digress—they're tried for their crimes, and then the ringleader crab is sentenced to death while the mortar and the others are to be imprisoned for life. No one in society defended the crab during the trail. The head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, or something like that, accused the crab of being a communist, the socialists accused the crab of having dangerous ideas, and so on. Basically, the crab was alone. Having lost their pillar, the crab's family sinks into a pit of misfortune, and, well, that's basically the story."

"I want to read it," Ibara said, sounding somewhat dissatisfied, "but is that really all there is to it?"

"Well, I mean, there's more to it than that, but I'm afraid I'll butcher the story if I try to explain more. At any rate, here's H.O.-senpai's story."

Now then, will I be tried for my past evils, or will I be able to return to a peaceful life? It all goes down now.

I Read "The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab"

H.O. - Third Year

I read "***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab.***" I felt bad for the crab and his friends. My life is peaceful

now, but I can never know if I'll wind up in a troublesome situation like theirs at some point. It makes me think about what I'd do if I was in their position.

Just like the author himself says, when the monkey killed the crab by throwing the unripened persimmon, he committed involuntary manslaughter. The crab's son, on the other hand, didn't kill the monkey on accident—it was coldblooded murder. It was carried out after extensive planning. It's unavoidable really that he was charged with a capital crime, and the justification for giving his friends life sentences makes a good deal of sense as well.

However, had the defense lawyer been more skilled, I can't help but feel the proceeding might've gone more in the crab's favor. After reviewing the court materials (children's folk tale picture book), I was shocked to find that while the crab did indeed harbor malicious intent, that intent didn't factor into the murder. The one that broke into the monkey's house was the egg (rather than a chestnut. The bee and the mortar remained the same. I didn't realize there were versions in which an egg was one of the friends), the bee was the one that stung him, and while it was the crab who held the reins, the mortar was the one who killed the monkey in the end, not the crab. While the court case referenced the horse

feces that prevented the monkey's escape, that account was omitted from the materials, likely in an attempt to preserve the story's decency.

The crab could have probably used this to protest the murder charge: *It's true I told the mortar and the others about my woes, but I never once asked them to kill the monkey for me. I ask the court: Do you have any proof that I requested they murder the monkey?* If I recall, the crab's friends were like-minded comrades who offered their help in extracting revenge out of a sense of righteous indignation. They were likely not assassins, nor was there any trace of a reward on the monkey's head.

On the subject of the egg being in the fire pit, while the egg exploded and did indeed hit the monkey as I am sure you are all aware, calling that incident of mere misfortune something as outrageous as murder is surely a gross overstatement. The bee as well could've simply said it was attacked while minding its own business next to the bottle of water, a situation in which anyone would fight back. The only one who couldn't defend himself was the perpetrator of the murder himself—the mortar. The one who got his hands dirty was the one who drew the short end of the stick.

It's a shame the crab ended up getting executed, but he had a chance to get out of it. When getting involved in some kind of plan, it's best you go over a

rough draft first. This is my impression from reading "***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab.***"

"What did I just read?" said Satoshi in a crazed voice.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" responded Ohinata giddily, to which Mayaka continued, seemingly dissatisfied.

"It's not *not* interesting, but it's kinda like—how do I put it—like it's not taking itself seriously?"

Yes, that's exactly it. This essay isn't taking itself seriously at all. Now then, let's put this whole thing aside and start talking about world peace why don't we?

"It's shorter than the reports for ***Run Melos*** and ***Records of the Moon over the Mountain,***" muttered Chitanda, dashing my silent plea. "Why is that, Oreki-san?"

I can't exactly stay quiet if she brings me into the conversation like that. I moved only my head to face Chitanda.

"I told you this before, but I thought the book report had to be five pages or more on manuscript paper. I realized later it was actually *no more than* five pages, so I did a shorter one in my third year. That's all there is to it."

Chitanda let her eyes fall back down to the pamphlet and nodded unenthusiastically. "Is that so…"

Part of her looks dissatisfied with something. Cold sweat traveled down my spine.

“Sorry Ohinata,” prefaced Satoshi before turning to me, “and sorry Houtarou, but I’m not so sure about this one. I felt myself agreeing with what you had to say in the ***Moon over Mountain*** one, but this report was different. I know I’m saying this without reading Akutagawa’s story first, but the analysis in this one feels like you’re just nitpicking the details.”

“Whaaat?” interjected Ohinata, “Then what’s the difference between nitpicking and actual analysis?”

“When I have to put it into words—”

It looked like he was having a difficult time coming up with what to say.

“—I can’t really come up with a good answer.”

“Right? This one definitely seems more unfocused, so I get why not everyone would like it, but I personally really loved reading it, and I didn’t think it was all too different from the ***Moon over Mountain*** one.”

I was truly happy to hear Ohinata gush like that over my shoddy analysis, but Satoshi was right. It was nothing more than nitpicking. I stayed silent, not interested in chiming in with that information, and then Ibara turned towards Ohinata, arms crossed.

“I also haven’t read the original story, so I’m not sure I can explain it too well either. Whether it’s manga or novels, there’ll always be parts that are left unwritten and others that were written ambiguously. Writing everything into the story is just

cumbersome, and probably impossible in the first place," she said as if giving a lecture.

Without trying to contradict her, Ohinata asked, "What do you mean?"

"In manga centered around people exploring labyrinths, you never see people going to the bathroom, right? Whether you see that omission as an oversight on the author's part or them simply trimming the story of unnecessary information affects how you react to the work. It's like that."

"I can kinda see what you mean."

"I think nitpicking is when you take those vague parts of the story and then purposely focus on and distort them."

"Um…"

"I imagine in his story, Akutagawa didn't write anything about the crab and his friends confessing that they worked together, right? Judging by the fact that the crab was sentenced to death and that his friends were given life sentences, however, I think it's safe to assume that there was some kind of proof or a confession that settled the question of their being accomplices, whether it was written in the story or not. Sure it might've been clearer if he added that part into the story outright, but just like using the bathroom in a labyrinth, writing everything into a story doesn't necessarily make it better. Especially when the story's trying to focus on a different point altogether."

Ohinata nodded silently, and Ibara continued.

“Oreki, however, took that unwritten part to be an inconsistency in the story and said that the crab and the others should’ve denied working together. If Oreki honestly believed their being accomplices wasn’t already determined in the story, then he either didn’t read deeply enough into the story, or he was criticizing the quality of the original work. Either way, it’s criticism, good or bad aside. And—”

Ibara stole a glance in my direction, though her gaze wasn’t all that fierce.

“—if instead he knew the part was simply implied and not forgotten and still wrote the paper as if it were an oversight on the author’s part, then that would be nitpicking. His ‘Moon over Mountain’ analysis was weird, but it didn’t feel like he was trying to spite the story. I think this is what Fuku-chan was trying to say.”

I guess I’d expect nothing less of someone who drew her own manga. Honestly speaking, I didn’t think that far into it. Ohinata turned to Satoshi and asked, “Is she right?” but he only half-smiled back.

“Probably. Sorry, I got a little lost.”

As if rubbed the wrong way by Satoshi’s response or embarrassed at her own speech, she threw up her arms a little and said, “Anyways, that’s all!”

Ohinata stared at the two pamphlets and muttered, “So you’re saying these two reports are fundamentally different? But if we don’t know what Oreki-senpai was—what H.O. was thinking, then

we can't really say for sure if it's nitpicking or not. Isn't that leaving a lot up in the air?"

Satoshi's shoulders drooped. "It is. Well, there's nothing we can do about it, really. There's no way to fully understand what someone else is thinking, so how could we possibly understand their writing either?"

It feels like he's giving up a little too easily, not that it bothers me. That poorly-crafted work was judged to be poorly crafted, and with that, the trial finally came to a close. I'm still not convinced I'll be able to escape to safety yet, even if I get out of my seat. Let's interrupt with a witty one-liner to round things off and finally put a stop to this unproductive after-school chat once and for all.

That's when it happened. Chitanda, who had been silently gazing at the book report up until this moment, placed a finger on her lips and started to almost imperceptibly mutter something.

"So, tsu, gi, yo, u?"

"Huh? What?" asked Ibara in a confused voice, but Chitanda's eyes remained fixed on the pamphlet.

"Mayaka-san, what does *'sotsugiyou'* mean?"

Chitanda's eyes suddenly came alive.

"*'Sotsugyou'!* 'Graduation'! That has to be it!"

Throughout my entire body, I could feel the sensation of the world crumbling beneath me. Ohhh, dear god…

"What about graduation?"

In response to Satoshi's question, Chitanda removed the finger from her lips and pointed at my book report. Please stop, I beg of you… And it was Chitanda of all people!

"Oreki-san surely wrote his essay on manuscript paper, so I tried imagining how it looked originally."[3]

"Originally? You mean the essay was changed?"

"Not that. What happens when you write using manuscript paper? If you use the kind with 400 boxes, you'll have twenty columns with twenty spaces each."

"Oh!" Satoshi nodded emphatically. "So you mean their position on the page changes. That's true. Once you write twenty characters, you have to move to the next line. What does that have to do with anything, though?"

"When you move to the next line, it turns into graduation."

Absentminded cluelessness filled the air.

"Um, what graduates?"

Chitanda's face turned bright red. "I'm sorry! Let me explain from the beginning."

Just stop this, please… Her eyes darted around as if trying to figure out how to sort out the situation, and then she finally started to speak, readying herself once and for all.

"I sensed something was very off in Oreki's writing here. The crab, the mortar, and the bee." She pointed out several areas in the book report with her finger. "Sometimes he writes these

words in kanji, and other times he uses katakana[4]. In his report on 'Records of the Moon over the Mountain,' this kind of inconsistency wasn't present."

Ibara and Ohinata both opened their mouths in surprise.

"Oh, you're right."

"Now that you mention it…"

"That's not the only strange part. I was allowed the pleasure of reading Oreki-san's analysis on ***Run Melos*** as well, and yet, there was something present in his report on ***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab*** that was missing from his two earlier works." Chitanda paused for a small moment, her face becoming gravely serious. "He inserts himself into the analysis."

That's right. Only in that one was I forced to write like that.

"When he mentions checking the children's book, he writes, 'after reviewing the court materials (children's folk tale picture book).' This is the only time he writes like that, so then why did he use it only there? What was his reason for alternating between kanji and katakana? Furthermore, why was it this short? I was so very curious!"

Chitanda glanced over at me and continued.

"I thought about asking Oreki-san, but… he seemed rather embarrassed about having his book reports read by others, so I restrained myself and instead tried to figure it out without help. In order to accomplish that, I first tried imagining how the report looked initially."

That part doesn't make any sense.

Satoshi grinned slightly as if agreeing with me and said, "I think it's a little weird that your first reaction was to imagine how it was written on manuscript paper…"

Chitanda tilted her head slightly. "Really?"

"Really."

"I just figured it was important to refer back to the original… And not only that, but I'm quite good at sorting things around in my head like this."

With a beaming smile, she raised both of her fists like a champion, as if particularly proud of that skill.

Looking somewhat unsure, Ibara brought over her pencil case.

"The line breaks after twenty characters, right? Is it okay if I write on the pamphlet, Hina-chan?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

Some time passed in silence. If they were splitting up the lines correctly, I can only imagine it looked like this:

I read "***The Fight between the Monkey and the Crab.***" I felt bad ／ for the crab and his friends. My life is peaceful now, but I can never know if I'll wind up in a ／troublesome situation like theirs at some point. It makes ／ me think about what I'd do if I was in their position.

Just like the author himself says, when ／ the monkey killed the crab by throwing the unripened persimmon, he committed involuntary manslaughter. ／ The crab's son, on the other hand, didn't kill the monkey on accident—it ／ was coldblooded murder. It was carried out after extensive planning. It's unavoidable really that he ／ was charged with a capital crime, and the justification for ／ giving his friends life sentences makes a good deal of sense as well.

"So then, what next?"

Clearly getting impatient, Chitanda started to shake her hands around at nothing. "Once I imagined the story as if it were written on manuscript paper, certain characters started to stand out. Well… the last character in every column connects together."

It's over.

It's all over!

"So, when I sorted it out in my head like this and read the characters at the bottom of the page, they formed the word *'sotsugyou,'* or 'graduation.' There should be more after that."

"Really? Isn't it just a coincidence?"

With a doubtful expression, Ibara started to move her pencil across the page…

猿蟹合戦を読んで

三年　H・O

猿蟹合戦を読んだ。蟹や蜂たちがかわいそうだと思った。いまは平穏でも、自分もいつ厄介事に巻き込まれるかわからない。ぎりぎりの時にどうふるまうか考えさせられた。

作者も書くとおり猿が蟹に青柿を投げ、よって殺したのは傷害致死だが、一方の蟹はつかり殺したわけではなく、殺人だ。計画は入念に練られていた。重罪であり死罪もまあ

“Sotsugyou wa… are… nonotabi… noichi… ridukau… reshi…”

As Ibara stumbled over the words, Ohinata suddenly jumped in with a huge shout.

“I got it! It’s a poem!

Sotsugyou wa

Areno no tabi no

Ichiri dzuka

Ureshiku mo nashi

Kanashiku mo nashi

Graduation

Is a single milepost

On a barren journey.

Neither is it joyful,

Neither is it sorrowful.

Oh my god!”

Chitanda spoke with a sense of deep satisfaction. “It seems its based on a satirical poem by the Zen Buddhist monk, Ikkyu[5].

The New Year's pines

Are a single milepost

To the next world.

At times, it is welcome,

At times, it is unwelcome.

Oreki-san took the original poem and composed his own to express his profound feelings towards the end of his third year in middle school. Then, he incorporated it into his book report."

Satoshi continued, "Wow… who would've guessed it? *The* Oreki Houtarou… I'm shocked. A barren journey, huh? Now why would the energy-conservationist Houtarou want to go out of his way to put effort into something like this?"

Ohinata was all but jumping around in joy by this point.

"Isn't it obvious?! Oreki-senpai actually enjoyed it! He loved writing book reports, and he probably loved Mr. Hanashima's classes too! Isn't that right, senpai? Huh? What's going on with you over there?"

Have none of these people ever had to hear their middle school poems being read back to them? How could they possibly do something so cruel with such straight faces?! With both of my arms dangling lifelessly on either side of me, I collapsed onto my desk. With my face hidden from the rest of them, I sighed in

complete defeat, and then in one short sentence, I laid bare my honest feelings as precisely as I could.

“Just kill me already.”

Translator Notes

The Tiger and the Crab, or The Murder of Oreki Houtarou

[1] A phrase often used by author Futaro Yamada (1922-2001) in his stories.

[2] ***The Tale of Heike*** is a long war epic based on the conflict between the Taira and Minamoto clans at the end of the 12th century. The epic itself was compiled around a century after those events.

[3] Japanese manuscript paper has vertically-aligned boxes instead of lines (like graph paper with one character occupying one space) and is primarily used for rough drafts and hand-written submissions.

[4] Katakana and hiragana are syllabaries in Japanese that correspond with specific sounds. (e.g. か = “ka”) Kanji are symbols derived from Chinese that correspond primarily to meanings instead. (e.g. 蟹 = “crab”) Both of these are used in Japanese writing, but you can choose when to use either one. People are usually consistent when they do, but Chitanda here is pointing out how Oreki wasn’t.

[5] Ikkyu (1394–1481) is a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk who is extremely well-known for his contributions to the religion as well as his deeply eccentric personality. This poem here refers to how “New Year’s pines” (a common New Year’s decoration) signal the passing of time, and how

even though many people celebrate New Year’s, it is also a step closer to death.